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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LISBON 001572

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NSC FOR JUDY ANSLEY

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SUBJECT: PORTUGUESE FOREIGN MINISTER DISCUSSES HUGO CHAVEZ  
WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: A) LISBON 1511 B) LISBON 408 C) LISBON 391

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CLASSIFIED BY: MATT HARRINGTON, POLITICAL OFFICER, STATE  
DEPARTMENT, REASON: 1.4 (B) & (C).

Summary

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11. (C) The Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Luis Amado to get a readout of Prime Minister Socrates's July 23 meeting with Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, which occurred during the latter's refueling stopover at the Lisbon Airport. The Ambassador expressed strong concern about Venezuela's military buildup and noted that the optics of the July 23 meeting were unfortunate -- particularly since Chavez was visiting Belarus, Iran, and Russia on the same trip. The GOP believes engaging Chavez is more effective than isolating him, and that hearing a common-sense message from countries such as Portugal will offset the populist nonsense he hears from leaders like Belarus President Lukashenko and Iranian President Ahmadinejad. Portugal treads very carefully in its relationship with Chavez, since 600,000 citizens live in Venezuela, the largest Portuguese community outside Europe. Socrates delivered some tough messages and underscored Portugal's strong relationship with the United States. According to press reports, the Prime Minister also discussed boosting economic ties, including the possibility of mutual oil interests. End Summary.

12. (C) Amado told the Ambassador that Prime Minister Socrates learned late on Friday, July 21, that Hugo Chavez would be making a refueling stop at the Lisbon Airport two days later and had requested a meeting with Socrates. The Prime Minister felt obligated to meet him and asked Amado to give the Ambassador a heads-up, as he expected the meeting would be viewed with suspicion in Washington. "I completely forgot," Amado claimed, and "the Prime Minister even asked me when I arrived at the airport (to join the meeting) whether I had spoken with you."

13. (C) Amado said Socrates and Chavez had met several times before at multilateral meetings and enjoy a friendly rapport. The Prime Minister delivered some tough messages, according to Amado, on the importance of regional stability and political dialogue, and he emphasized the importance of transatlantic relations. Socrates also underscored to Chavez Portugal's strong alliance with the United States, and offered to help address difficulties in the U.S.-Venezuela

relationship. Chavez, Amado recalled, immediately dismissed that offer, saying that many people had tried in the past and implying that his differences with the U.S. were not so easy to resolve. Chavez told Socrates that he previously had enjoyed a good relationship with President Bush, Sr., who used to go on fishing expeditions in Venezuela.

14. (C) Amado said the presence of 600,000 Portuguese citizens in Venezuela, the largest community of Portuguese outside Europe, requires the GOP to pay very close attention to that bilateral relationship, which is marked by periodic tensions. The Ambassador recalled Socrates's comment to President Bush, Sr. in March (ref C) that it is important to keep Chavez engaged, and the former president's response that Chavez's intensely personal rhetoric against U.S. leaders makes engagement difficult. The Ambassador said he understood Portugal's position but noted that the optics were strange, as Portugal was one stop for Chavez in a trip that included Belarus, Iran, and, originally, North Korea. The timing of the meeting was unfortunate, as well, as it occurred the day before the Ambassador called the National Security Council to discuss PM Socrates's interest in a meeting with President Bush.

15. (C) Chavez, the Ambassador said, has chosen to make the U.S. his enemy and his effort to build up a major military capacity raises troubling questions about his intentions. Yes, absolutely, Amado agreed. "We definitely need to deal with this personality very carefully." He said Portugal's only intention is to be an honest broker. Someone "from our side" has to talk to him from time to time; he needs to hear messages from those who think like we think. Otherwise, Amado cautioned, Chavez will develop a skewed perception of reality if he only has contact with people like Lukashenko and Ahmadinejad. Chavez is "a smart guy, populist, and emotional, but I don't see him as irrational," Amado commented. His actions are in fact very rational. Amado contended that Chavez's criticisms of the United States are grounded in the reality of recent political trends in South America, particularly a growing anti-Americanism. Amado expressed his view that Europe has a role to play in that region in softening that political dynamic.

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Comment

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16. (C) We have had many discussions with senior Portuguese officials about Venezuela, and it is clear they share our concerns about his domestic policies and the threat he poses to regional stability. That said, the GOP is very careful to avoid taking any actions it believes might affect the well-being of the large Portuguese community in Venezuela. For instance, Portugal has decided to support Guatemala over Venezuela in the upcoming election for a UN Security Council seat and to encourage -- very quietly -- its former African colonies to do the same, but it is very nervous about the potential impact of that decision on its citizens in Venezuela. We suspect that concern was the primary reason Socrates agreed to Chavez's request for a meeting, and not any desire to cozy up to a leader he considers unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Although Amado did not mention it, media reports indicated that Socrates and Chavez discussed the possibility of boosting economic ties, including in the oil sector.

HOFFMAN